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Houses of Identity: Inhabiting and Emerging from Despair

Hilary Siebert

> "Listen," she goes. "You remember the time we drove out to that old farm place outside Yakima, out past Terrace Heights?... Can you imagine us doing that now? Going up to a house and asking for a drink of water?"
> Raymond Carver, "Gazebo"

1 The traditional notion of a writer's "vision" suggests that the body of texts a writer has produced offers readers a particular way of seeing and knowing a particular "world" of interest to that writer. Yet no sooner do we try to define such concepts than the complexity of the matter becomes apparent: what "reality" is it that the writer's text seems to be signifying, exactly? is it something we might define in historical, social, or psychological terms? and how are we to infer a way of seeing from the presentation of what is portrayed?

2 In the case of Raymond Carver's short stories, these questions are especially interesting, since Carver was an avid re-writer, a person whose biographical circumstances changed dramatically during his career, and – according to D.T. Max – an author whose name appears not only on the texts he wrote but on those heavily edited and re-written by Gordon Lish. Visions of reality are compounded by versions of reality. The "minimalist" Carver, who Max ascribes to the heavy editorial hand of Lish, seems to be a fairly different author from more "generous" Carver, the Carver who emerged after his recovery from alcoholism, his divorce and subsequent remarriage, and the termination of his editorial relationship with Lish.

3 In a classic pairing of Carver texts such as "The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing," the two tendencies are apparent. Reality, in the former text, is presented in the form of an individual, existential experience of personal tragedy in a typical white, protestant

family; healing and recovery are inhibited by the breakdown of genuine communication at all levels between people apparently in a position to help each other, although the ritual cleansing of a bath seems to provide potential for individual renewal, if only there were peace and time enough. The latter text uses what Ewing Campbell has very aptly described as persistent cultural myths of sacrifice and redemption, whereby the characters overcome the Foucauldian "madness" produced by the horrors of daily reality through the expression of therapeutic anger (53-4).

4 "Fear" – which had made the father in the first story "want a bath" (49) – is a reaction to ordinary reality which Carver seemed to champion in his essay "On Writing" from *Fires*, when he described the importance of creating an imminent "feeling of threat or sense of menace" in a short story (26). Reality in many of Carver's stories is indeed a fearful experience. But in his later stories such as "A Small, Good Thing," "Cathedral," or "Blackbird Pie," Carver seemed more interested in taking his characters – and readers – not simply into the world of fears but back out across a potential threshold where a character might emerge into something new.

5 How, then, are we to understand the differing kinds of reality and the nature of experience in Carver's stories? Do they reflect an early alcoholic Carver, mired in pain, and a late redemptive Carver, saved by new opportunities? Or is Lish the advocate of despair, and Carver the advocate of hope, even at the cost of sentimentality?

6 It seems clear that recovery and hope were important forces in Carver's mind during the final decade of his life, as Carver explained on various occasions, including the late autobiographical poem "Gravy." And it is also true that Lish appears to be more the advocate of existential fear and Carver the force behind an interest in transformative possibilities; Adam Meyer's critical analysis of Carver's story versions from 1989, along with Max's more recent study, show us that much.

7 Yet, the biographical analysis I have just presented does little to put a finger on just what it is that marks the "reality" and way of experiencing life that Carver's readers come to know in his stories. Rather, it is the intimacy with which we witness their feelings of hope and despair that particularizes them. My aim in this paper is to show how Carver at all points in his career constructed personal spaces haunted by the harsh facts of failure and isolation – while at the same time these spaces reflect either the desire or the ability of characters to look beyond the world they inhabit, emerging from the trappings of their lives in oblique ways or at unexpected moments. The issue of *what* characters experience, what reality, with what degree of confinement or emergence, needs to be examined in relation to the question of *how* characters undergo experience in highly particular physical situations and settings: a house ("Chef's House," "Cathedral"), a kitchen ("What We Talk About When We Talk About Love"), or a bed ("Chef's Wife," "Whoever Was Using This Bed").

8 Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological explanation of identity provides a useful way to look at human experience in terms of situated being. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard transfigures Heidegger's "Dasein" and Sartre's "être-là" from "being-there" to a dynamic notion of movement between structures which house being and those which allow it to expand outward and emerge into new spaces (213). The house, as an intimate space like the body itself, both defines and confines being (5-7); but in order to grow, being must follow an inevitable process of "spiraling" from inside to outside, emerging into new spaces in which to reside (11, 214).

9 While this may all sound very abstract, it is a simple matter to apply Bachelard's ideas to Carver's stories by examining concretely the intimately inhabited spaces presented in the texts, such as houses. Such spaces reflect a sense of identity to the characters themselves, but one that becomes confining, and that characters aspire to transcend – for reasons which themselves are thematically important, as they reflect to readers the social reality experienced in the storyworld.

10 Houses and interior spaces figure prominently in Carver's texts. Despite references to local place names in Oregon and Washington state, only occasional stories such as "So Much Water So Close to Home" and "Tell the Women We're Going" are significant for their outdoor settings; the vast majority present indoor conversations. The point is that the home, for Carver's characters, is always a vital space.

11 What, then, do the intimate residences of Carver's stories house? Typically, they house the accumulated pain of the characters who live in them. But as aspects of story texts, they house the dynamic process of establishing and propelling character identity: characters inhabit interior spaces as a way of dealing with the past – which is constructed into the space itself – and facing some kind of horizon within or beyond the space.

12 We can gain an interesting perspective on Carver's stories by looking first at how the intimate spaces in which they are set establish character identity, and then observing a particular process by which characters move or try to move beyond that world. Sometimes the movements are no more than mental reflections on the past or daydreams of a future, sometimes they are thoughts acted out in words, and at other times characters are propelled physically into other scenes where the possibilities are greater.

13 In applying this notion, we can see why "The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing" are such different stories. The parents in "The Bath" cannot get beyond their pain, in large part, because they can't recuperate the stable identity they seek in their house when they return there from the hospital; and thus they can't "move on" with their lives. Carver's way of moving them along in "A Small, Good Thing" requires a fairly complicated apparatus of creating new scenes, moving the characters beyond the house and hospital and onto a dramatic stage of reconciliation in the bakery. The story is more "hopeful" not simply because the husband and wife are able to share their grief but because they are lifted out of the scenes of grief into a different kind of emotional environment.

14 The environments in most of Carver's stories, however, provide transports that are much more seamless, which from my point of view makes them more subtle and convincing. They rely on strategies of metaphoric comparison, for instance, to reflect one setting experienced by a character in relation to an alternative one. "Cathedral," for example, transforms a typically small-minded, fearful husband's expectations of his wife's friend's visit as a violation of his personal space ("A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to" [266]) into a final sensation of intimacy in an open environment. Tracing the cathedral with the blind man, the narrator knows he is still in his house, "But I didn't feel like I was inside anything" (279).

15 Focusing on the house as a phenomenological construction of identity, we can observe a variety of ways in which Carver uses interior spaces first to illustrate the housing of being and then the human need to go beyond one's immediate horizons. The identity of

Carver's characters is defined by their pasts, which surround them, and by their hopes, which lie beyond these immediate spaces. Most characters, as in "Cathedral," don't see the serious limitations of their "housing" until they are released from it through no intention of their own, due to an event that alters or calls attention to the circumstances of their lives.

16 In fact, what makes Carver's stories so intimate (or "lyrical," as I have argued elsewhere), are the ways in which characters are brought before our eyes to an awareness of their limitations: an awareness that is not necessarily realized or articulated, but is revealed by the use of phenomenological images. A related issue which explains much of the controversy concerning Carver's revisions concerns this very revelation of awareness by the characters. In striving to compensate for the inarticulateness and helplessness of people who inhabit his "minimalist" texts, in certain later stories such as "A Small, Good Thing" and "Fever," Carver seems to go overboard in making the narrator articulate realizations his characters have achieved; the penultimate paragraph of "Fever" provides one such example (247). "Cathedral" and "Blackbird Pie" work differently – despite being from roughly the same, later period – because they contain highly limited extensions of story time and story space, and therefore must resort to image and suggestion rather than to an assertion or dramatization of awareness.

17 The question of character identity, then, is something we can study on intimate terms by focusing on images of housing in stories of limited time duration and restricted settings. Among Carver texts there are at least three ways in which character identities are modified phenomenologically, through an actual or imagined "re-housing" of identity. These types of modification are not mutually exclusive, and in each case the resultant change may be positive or negative, temporary or permanent.

18 1) *Transformative Houses*: in these texts, as in "Cathedral," story events alter the way a character views the space in which that character resides, implicitly changing the character's way of seeing, thinking, and being, e.g., seeing one's house as an open cathedral rather than as a closed, private space. Examples include "Neighbors," "What We Talk About," "Feathers," "Chef's House," and "Fever." In "Neighbors" and "Feathers," an alternative residence inspires the transformation in the characters' way of residing in the usual residence, for better or for worse, just as in "Chef's House" the alternative residence begins to create a character transformation, only to finally highlight the failure of this possibility and an awareness of the life that must be lived without this house.

19 2) *Past and Present Houses*: in these texts, the situation of character identity in a present residence is contrasted strikingly with identity in a past residence. The contrast reveals a grotesque situation by putting images of abnormal residence in the present up against parallel images of apparent normalcy in the past. Examples include "Gazebo," "Why Don't You Dance?" and "Put Yourself in My Shoes."

20 3) *A Glimpse Outside*: in these texts, circumstances bring characters suddenly to consciousness of a world outside the domain of their daily lives. Examples include "The Ducks," "The Student's Wife," "I Could See the Smallest Things," and "Blackbird Pie."

21 Looking briefly, then, at each of these ways in which Carver's characters potentially transcend their limitations, the first category presents the most obvious changes. Not all these "Transformations" are of the same magnitude, nor do they all move characters in equally positive directions. "Fever" is similar to "Cathedral" in providing

the protagonist with a new way of residing within his own house, within his own identity, as the result of the visit of an outsider. "Neighbors," "Feathers," and "Chef's House" provide potential transformations differently, since in these cases characters inhabit an alternative residence and thereby experience a new way of being.

22 In "Neighbors," the temporary, vicarious experience of other people's lives in the apartment next door reinvigorates first the husband and then the wife, both sexually and in more general terms, as each one tries out and tries on the lives and the very clothing of the neighboring couple. Their final state of apparent exile when they are locked out of the apartment leaves these characters in a suspended state of identity, as though posing a question as to how they will maintain the identity they have discovered next door, since their identity till now has been rooted in different premises.

23 "Chef's House" is a more open-and-shut case of an assumed identity in an alternative residence. Wes, a recovering alcoholic, is able to achieve a recovery of all the old romance with his ex-wife – but only so long as they inhabit the idyllic summertime space of the house Chef lets them live in. Once Chef reclaims his house, Wes abruptly loses hope, as though without the place his identity could only be the bitter one of loss known to an alcoholic, left to his own premises.

24 "Feathers" too is temporary, in the sense that it presents the experience of a larger, more hopeful self which the narrator achieves empathetically when he and his wife visit a friend's house. The visit seems to inspire the husband and wife to the point where they make love and conceive a child, but this larger vision is lost to them thereafter.

25 "What We Talk About" portrays no actual alternative residence at all but rather the conditions in which one is being shaped emotionally. The four characters are all in a state of transition, both in terms of residence and identity. They are in Albuquerque temporarily but were "all from somewhere else" (128), as well as from different past romantic relationships. Sitting in a kitchen, drinking gin and debating the horrors and truths of "love," they reach a sudden stasis at the end, in which the room goes dark and no one moves to turn the light on or speak. The end of the story brings them into a point of inward reflection in which they seem called upon to take stock of who they are in relation to the question of "love" and somehow redefine themselves.

26 The second category of story exemplifies texts which illuminate the present as a grotesque reflection of the past. Though these stories do not necessarily indicate a way out, they are constructive in bringing characters to the end of a path that is leading them nowhere. At the end of "Gazebo," the image of green "crud" which fills the pool of the motel the alcoholic couple is supposed to be managing is held up against the idyllic image of "dignified" life of a married couple at a farmhouse that the protagonists had once visited. In "Why Don't You Dance?" a man transports and transforms the bedroom of his marriage into a yard sale, where a couple of young lovers try out the furniture, as though trying on the space of married life in the form of a parody.

27 "Put Yourself in My Shoes" portrays the housing of present and past identities with a masterful complexity. On the surface the story presents a seemingly polite "visit" by a couple to the house they once rented, with the purpose of getting to know the owners. A series of conversations reveals almost surrealistically, between the lines, the extent to which the visiting couple abused the house as renters, and the latent anger of the

owners. Just at the point in which the story seems to be revealing the true identity of the visiting couple, however, it becomes clear that the owners of the house are far from "normal" themselves, both in the repression and the expression of their anger. The visiting man is an apparently alcoholic writer looking for a story, and the visit becomes the story. The house of the past reveals, on the one hand, the man's despair and depravity, while on the other hand, the story in an ironic way becomes a metaphoric housing for the man's aspiring identity as a writer. The story "exposes" all of the characters for what they are. But Myers, the story's center of consciousness, is in the end not merely an alcoholic writer, living apparently alone in an apartment, but a successful writer of short fiction, capable of transforming the grotesque facts of these four people's lives into the "house of fiction," which is where he resides.[1] In this sense, this story too is a transformation, in which a visit to an emotionally haunted house of the past fills the protagonist's empty life, where he aspires to write but only vacuums his apartment, having apparently failed as a spouse and as an employee.

28 The final category provides characters with an unexpected glimpse outside the domain of their identities. In "The Ducks" and "The Student's Wife," the central character in a young couple experiences insomnia, caused by a feeling of oppression from a stifled existence. In the first story, the male character says, "I think I want to get out of here. Go someplace else." As his wife sleeps on, he is focused outside the window. "'Wake up,' he whispered, 'I hear something outside'" (182). In the second story, the glimpse outside at an all-illuminating sunrise after a night of insomnia terrifies the female character, as though revealing more to her than she can bear of the grim facts before her in her apartment (32).

29 "I Could See the Smallest Things" is another story of insomnia in a couple's life. Here the woman finds herself outside the house in her nightgown, reflecting on her relationship with the neighbors, while the neighbor, in his pajamas, is sprinkling poison on slugs in the garden. The story provides an offbeat moment in which the present and past relationships can be sized up and even discussed between the two of them. As the woman goes back to sleep, at least momentarily she is placed in a position of reflection: "I thought for a minute of the world outside my house..." (36).

30 "Blackbird Pie," also a story set late at night, portrays a male character walking outside the house he sees as his domain, but in this case because his wife is leaving. The "fog" outside the house represents the dim but growing awareness with which the character must see beyond the normal horizons of his life.

31 The stories I have discussed here only provide one way to look at the ongoing process of identity in Carver's characters. Inside and outside their places of residence, these people are necessarily evolving, even as they are stifled. The image Bachelard uses to define the inside and outside of phenomenological existence is the mollusk, living in its shell. Considering Paul Valéry's essay on shells ("Les coquillages"), Bachelard concludes, "...the mollusk's motto would be: one must live to build one's house, not build one's house to live in" (105-6). The residences in Carver's stories are filled with his characters' lives, and since these lives are in flux, the perception of their houses too must change. At times, they expand, as in "Cathedral"; at other times, as in "Nobody Said Anything," they are too confining, and the central character must finally step outside them; or they have served their purposes for a stage in the character's life, as in "Collectors," and are being emptied out.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Vasiliki Fachard for her helpful reflections on this story.

ABSTRACTS

The physical settings of Raymond Carver's stories, in particular the living spaces his characters inhabit, present readers with images of the characters' intimate identities. By studying the way characters perceive these spaces, readers can observe in detail the ontological "reality" of life in Carver's story worlds. From this perspective, typical thematic issues such as confinement and helplessness are particularized in ways that demonstrate a phenomenological process of being, rather than the mere facts of isolation and despair. Applying Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological concepts of dynamic being to Carver's texts, readers can observe the ways in which living spaces define and confine character identities, while at the same time witnessing how the subtlest moments of character perception hold the potential for growth and change. Carver's stories reveal a variety of strategies for moving characters through their story worlds. Occasionally, Carver helps them along by taking them out of problematic settings, but more typically identities evolve through processes of perception and reflection: a glimpse outside one's dwelling place; the memory of past residences; or transformative visions of identity, based upon the reenvisioning of one's own dwelling.

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